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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 DHAKA 001843

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TAGS: [BG](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#)

SUBJECT: BANGLADESHI MEDIA FEELING HEAT FROM CARETAKER  
GOVERNMENT

REF: DHAKA 01382

Classified By: CDA a.i. Geeta Pasi. Reason 1.4(d)

11. (C) Summary: Bangladeshi media are under pressure. The Caretaker Government and especially the military apply pressure -- usually discreetly but sometimes not -- to limit coverage that is critical or provokes opposition to their policies. In recent months, authorities have shut down an all-news channel that aggressively covered anti-government protests and have placed restrictions on lively television talk shows. Journalists report phone calls from military intelligence and other officials who suggest how to play the day's news, leading media outlets to practice self censorship. Post will continue to express support for a free media and to seek opportunities to train reporters to improve the quality of local journalism, which often is wanting in resources and professionalism. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Media freedom has been a struggle in Bangladesh since the country's birth. Heavy-handed government interference was a mainstay during the many years of martial law during Bangladesh's early history. Newspapers, for example, did not publish the poems of martial-law ruler General Hossain Mohammad Ershad on front pages because of their great news value; they did so under orders from the government Press Information Department (PID). Although civilian governments that ran the country from 1991 to 2006 eschewed such tactics, several journalists investigating the country's endemic political corruption were murdered during that period. Culprits went unpunished and ministers scorned journalists on the floor of Parliament.

13. (S) Journalists report ongoing efforts by the Caretaker Government and the military to shape media coverage since coming to power in January. Officials have been particularly focused on television, which reaches far more Bangladeshis than do newspapers. In the immediate aftermath of August 20-22 nationwide anti-government rioting, we learned from journalists that the military Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) told television stations to halt all talk shows, which had become the country's most popular and freewheeling form of public discourse. About two weeks later, the country's telecommunications regulator pulled the plug on Bangladesh's first 24-hour news station, CSB. Although the government said it shut down the station for submitting forged documents as part of its broadcast application a year earlier, the move was widely seen as punishment for the channel's aggressive coverage of the August protests. According to Embassy reporting, DGFI found CSB reporters stage-managing at least one protest scene and airing a scene of street

violence unrelated to the protests as evidence anti-government rioting was spreading. Military intimidation of the channel, which is owned by the son of a man widely regarded as a political enforcer for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and now in jail on corruption charges, started well before the riots; Tushar Abdullah (protect), a senior editor at CSB, reported being summoned to the military cantonment five times since the channel went on air in March. Each time, he said, he was interviewed separately by officers who repeated the same personal questions about, for example, his address and his wife's employment.

14. (S) In September, the office of Information Adviser Mainul Hosein distributed guidelines for the resumption of television talk shows that included numerous restrictions to prevent anti-government comments being made on air. The guidelines forbid live talk shows and say that any kind of "instigating, blind and biased opinions, and statements that can create resentment toward the legitimate government of Bangladesh, should be avoided." Those are very broad parameters for producers who have learned that the military can be sensitive to the smallest perceived slight, and talk shows have become more cautious and less critical of the government. Monjurul Ahsan Bulbul (protect), the president of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists who works on two television news programs at ATN Bangla, a major TV channel, recounted one incident in which the DGFI was incensed over an on-air comment that Bangladeshi expatriate laborers remitted more money than Bangladeshi troops on peacekeeping missions. He said the talk show presenter who made that observation was removed from the program to placate the military.

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15. (C) Where the boundary lies between acceptable and unacceptable news coverage is fuzzy. Typically, officials do not use written decrees to tell media what to say. Instead, newspaper editors and television news producers have grown accustomed to phone calls from military intelligence and the PID with suggestions on how to play the day's news. From the run-down headquarters of the Bangla-language newspaper The Daily Sangbad, where he also works as executive editor, Bulbul holds up a copy of a recent edition and notes the front-page photo of Chief Adviser Fakhruddin Ahmed meeting World Bank President Robert Zoellick in New York. For three days running the PID suggested he run front-page photos of the Chief Adviser, who was on a trip to the United States for the United Nations General Assembly annual meeting. The newspaper complied.

16. (C) Not everyone is playing it safe. Media continue to publish reports on soaring inflation, which is a major source of popular disaffection, even though the government has asked media outlets to play up official efforts to keep prices down. Government efforts to force out of the country the leaders of the two major political parties -- Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League and Khaleda Zia of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) -- also received media criticism. In another example, the New Age newspaper was sharply critical of the government during the August riots (reftel) while other media refrained from commenting or were more cautious in their analysis. And in an extraordinary front-page comment on November 8, the New Age apologized to readers for not publishing photos of Mahbubur Rahman, a senior BNP leader who is a retired lieutenant general, under attack from party thugs. The apology said "a number of our journalists were repeatedly 'reminded,' however courteously, that Mahbub after all is a former army chief and publishing photographs of him being assaulted may not go down well with his former charges." It went on to describe the current media environment as "these times of

'reminders' and their untold consequences." (Comment: The New Age reporting may not be of great concern to authorities because it is an English-language publication with a small circulation of less than 10,000. End Comment.)

¶7. (C) Still, the uncertainty over what might happen to journalists who do not follow informal guidance and the ability of the government to intimidate wayward media barons have led to self censorship. Matiur Rahman, (protect) editor of the country's largest circulation newspaper, Prothom Alo, said he interpreted the appearance of his publisher's name on a publicly circulated list of suspects in the government's anti-corruption crackdown as a warning not to cross the regime. Other journalists say the government could harass insufficiently docile media owners by creating trouble for their other business holdings. Journalists also raise concerns that they are particularly vulnerable to arbitrary arrest and detention under the current emergency rule; they say this is especially true in the countryside where some journalists have been detained after displeasing local authorities. The respected domestic human-rights organization Odhikar reported 13 journalists arrested in the first 10 months of 2007, up from five during the corresponding period a year earlier. (Note: Reports of violence against journalists was down substantially, perhaps reflecting a decline in political party thuggery. End Note.)

¶8. (C) Bulbul said he believes virtually all Bangladeshi journalists practice self censorship. The owners of his newspaper do not allow articles that could provoke the Bangladeshi army, which is seen as a key player to be feared and respected. Sobhan says he occasionally sits down with his higher-ups to discuss what can and can't run in the paper. The acting editor "is scared of his own shadow," says Sobhan, and wouldn't allow him to write anything critical of the Burmese junta's crackdown on recent protests, fearing it would be seen as a backhand rebuke of Bangladesh's own military. Rahman, the Prothom Alo editor, says his paper too is very careful about what is reported on the military.

¶9. (S) One apparent development that suggests military efforts to influence media even after the Caretaker Government departs is the reported purchase by DGFI of shares in private television stations. A lawyer close to DGFI says it has formed an organization named Bangladesh

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Perspectives Research Foundation that has purchased 20 percent of the ETV station and is in the process of buying more than a third of the shares of Channel 1.

¶10. (C) Comment: Although reports that criticize the government and reflect poorly on its performance are not uncommon, journalists say they are unwilling to write critically about the military. For now, the military appears primarily concerned about its image in the media. Post will continue to closely monitor local media to determine whether military pressure on journalists spreads to their coverage of other areas, such as next year's elections. Post will continue to strongly advocate media freedom and emphasize its role in the development of young democracies and in fighting corruption; earlier this month the CDA a.i. received prominent news coverage for encouraging journalists to be active in the run-up to elections. Post also will seek opportunities to train Bangladeshi journalists so they are up to performing their duties in Bangladesh: to provide accurate and timely information and to serve as watchdogs of democracy.  
Pasi